

Fatimah, the quintessential politician

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KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia's first woman minister, Tun Fatimah Hashim, may no longer play an active role in Umno, but her face still lights up when recalling the 16 years she spent as a politician.

Although it all happened more than 30 years ago, the 82-year-old clearly recalled the historic events she helped to shape.

Describing it as "the best times of my life", she remembered with humour the times when she had to ride an elephant, or cross a river in a jeep for an Umno function.

But accessibility is not the only thing which has changed, said Fatimah, who is a mother of six children and doting grandmother and great-grandmother of 18 grandchildren and five great-grandchildren respectively.

During her time as an Umno leader, campaigning was carried out all the time, and not when party or general elections were around the corner. "Those days, we campaigned all the time, it was something we did

round the clock. But I don't see this any more," she said.

Fatimah said campaigns had to be ongoing as policies needed to be explained to the people.

"We wanted to get more people to join Umno and help to champion our causes, but now we don't need that sort of campaigning anymore as everyone is aware that Umno is a good party," said the former Kaum Ibu (later known as Wanita Umno) head.

She said everyone would get together to organise talks and other party-related functions, even when they were not preparing for general elections.

"In those days, the politicians did not have to fork out a single sen to organise a function. The kampung folk put up the tents and also bought and cooked the food.

"Whenever we organised an Umno function, everyone would chip in."

Fatimah said at the time, people wanted a change, and they knew that the change could only happen through Umno.

The former welfare minister hoped that this spirit of working together would be rekindled among the new generation of party leaders.

She also expressed her dismay at the emergence of money politics in Umno, adding that it would paint a negative image of the party.

"Please go back to our Islamic teachings. It is not good to be a part of such practices because one would never have peace of mind. You will not live in peace, and one day, such habits will backfire on you."

As much as she would have liked to attend the Umno general assembly which begins tomorrow, Fatimah is unable to do so due to her poor health.

"I still have a good memory, I can still see and remember things, but I cannot walk as I have a weak heart and am suffering from old age," she said.

But you can be sure she will be glued to her television set to follow the proceedings — and maybe even pass a comment or two.

"I have not been going there for the past few years due to my failing health. I cannot sit for too long as I need to use the bathroom all the time. But I will be watching it from the comfort of my room this year and, as always, I cannot wait for the president's (Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) speech," she said, before ending the interview as it was time for her medication.